

## Session Eight: A Mindfulness Based Life

You see, I want a lot.  
Perhaps I want everything:  
The darkness that comes with every infinite fall  
And the shivering blaze of every step up.  
So many live on and want nothing  
And are raised to the rank of prince  
By the slippery ease of their light judgments  
But what you love to see are faces  
That do work and feel thirst...  
You have not grown old,  
And it is not too late to dive  
Into your increasing depths where life  
Calmly gives out its own secret.  
REINER MARIA RILKE

### Revisiting the Mindfulness Support

As we practice mindfulness we become increasingly aware of distraction and notice how it plays out in our minds. We see again and again how we lose awareness and are carried down familiar pathways of habit that are often unskillful and repetitive, and how we lose connection with the present moment. Then, when we realise that we are distracted and bring our attention back to the support there is a sense of being spacious, centred and grounded, and we know what is happening while it is happening. So we become increasingly familiar with the changing dynamic of mindfulness and distraction, knowing what they feel like in the very core of our being. This is the process through which the growth of awareness happens.

Through our routine of settling, grounding and resting we find a different way in to the mindfulness process, allowing ourselves to 'drop into' awareness of the body. In so doing, we approach the mindfulness support from the mode of being, rather than the mode of doing, which carries with it all sorts of habits from everyday life like controlling and fixing and getting it right. So, when we work with a support, we do so in a very light and inclusive way, allowing our thoughts and emotions to come and go freely in our awareness. Moreover, we carry the quality of resting into how we engage with the support, so we approach it with the gesture of an open hand rather than a clenched fist. In this way, we do not inadvertently use the support as a way of blocking our mental and emotional experience. This is hazardous because it leads to suppression, which freezes our inner world and impedes the natural growth of awareness.

The support is a way of maintaining our connection with the present moment and it is something to come back to when we get distracted. When we drift off we notice where our attention has gone and we become curious and interested in where our mind goes. In this way, distraction is our teacher because it reveals our habitual patterning, enabling us to bring awareness to these different parts of ourselves. We learn not to oppose distraction directly because it carries the momentum of many years

behind it. So we use the support knowing that our habitual patterns will continue to play themselves out and knowing that our attention will be carried off by these patterns. In this way, everything becomes part of our mindfulness practice. There is no sense of failing or getting it wrong because wherever our attention goes the practice is simply to notice this.

As our practice deepens, we come to see that there is a subtle interplay between distraction and mindfulness. All through our training, there is a sense of 'losing it and finding it.' It is not neat and tidy. It is 'the full catastrophe', in the words of Kabat Zinn. Seldom are we single focused in the present moment. We come to accept this and see that it is part of the process of learning.

### **Zooming in and out**

We can use the analogy of watching a movie to illustrate the process of practicing mindfulness. One moment we are watching the movie, sitting in the cinema, and then in the next moment we find ourselves absorbed in one of the scenes, totally captivated and lost in the experience. As soon as we become aware of this, we notice an immediate sharpening of awareness and then find ourselves once again sitting in the cinema watching the film. In fact, we never moved from our seat!

We do not try to stop the movie. All we do is notice when we get caught in a scene and then mindfulness brings us back to our seat. We see how moment by moment our relationship to the movie changes. One moment we are in the scene; the next moment we are watching it.

Following on from this analogy, it is perhaps inaccurate to say that we 'bring our attention back to the support', as this can result in a sudden pulling away with the implicit sense of the thought being wrong. There may be a subtle violence as we wrench our attention back to the support. In fact, bringing our attention back to the support is more like 'zooming out' of a thought sequence we are caught in and regaining the fullness of our experience, that is, regaining a sense of perspective in which we are grounded in the body resting in this place at this time. Then we notice how our mind 'zooms in' to another thought and awareness is lost, such that we find ourselves back in the movie again, not watching it.

At one level, mindfulness is a form of remembering or recollection. We wake up in the movie and remember that we are intending to practice mindfulness, and then we 'zoom out' again coming back to our present moment experience. We notice that when we 'zoom in' and get drawn into the storyline our experience narrows and contracts. And then when we regain awareness, we see how our experience opens out again and we regain a sense of space and perspective.

So 'losing it and finding it' is all part of the process, all part of becoming familiar with our mind. And every time we come back to the support - every time we 'zoom out' of the movie or mental loop - mindfulness strengthens. It is like a balance scale. In the beginning distraction is stronger, then the more we practice mindfulness, the more it strengthens until finally it tips the balance.

There needs to be kindness and gentleness in this process. We allow the drama to happen. We don't try to stop the habitual patterns from playing themselves out. We welcome them and accept them, but at the same time we gradually refocus our attention on the support. There is also humour because we gradually come to see that it is all not a big deal. As we allow things to just happen and become curious and interested in where our attention goes, dropping any sense of succeeding or failing, our internal landscape becomes less threatening and fearful. Perhaps then we may start to actually experience that whatever happens in our mind is OK, and that we are fundamentally OK, too.

## **Mindfulness Support Revisited**

*30 – 45 minutes*

*Start by following the usual routine of settling, grounding and resting. When your mind starts to drift off into thinking, engage with one of the mindfulness supports such as sound or breath. Approach the support in a light and gentle way with an attitude that is kind and inclusive. Thoughts, emotions and sensations are free to arise, display and dissolve.*

*We notice how our mind moves and become curious as to where our attention goes. Wherever our mind wanders to becomes part of the practice. With this, comes a sense of relaxing and opening and allowing.*

*As our awareness deepens we notice that when we get distracted, our mind contracts and ‘zooms in’ to a thought or storyline. Noticing this, our awareness sharpens and our attention ‘zooms out’ again, bringing us back into our body, resting lightly with the support in this time and place. We become familiar with this process of ‘losing it and finding it’ again and again, noticing our own unique styles of distraction and pathways of habit.*

*All the time we simply pay attention to what is happening while it is happening with a kind and non-judgmental attitude.*

### **Letting Go**

At this stage in the course, we can practice meeting the ending with full awareness: embracing and breathing it in, and like the opening of a clenched hand, releasing it and letting it go. As in many areas of our lives, we will learn that letting go is not losing, but instead is an opening up to the unfolding of our lives. Having drunk from this well of abundance, feeling nourished, we can let go of the well, and take this replenishment into the rest of our lives.

### **Reflection: Review of the journey so far**

- How was I when I first arrived at the first session of this course?
- How am I now?
- What are the main things I have learned on this course?
- How will I implement what I have learned into my daily life?
- What are my reasons for continuing to practice mindfulness after this course ends?

### **Where do you go from here?**

The journey you have taken together over these past weeks has no doubt generated some momentum and you have been supported by one another in your practice. However, at this stage, it may feel that your practice is still fairly new and you may not all feel confident or ready to “go it alone”. This is entirely normal and understandable but it is also an opportunity to truly make these practices your own and to integrate them more fully into your lives.

One thing that will help is to keep in mind your commitment, and to remember why you have been cultivating this habit of mindfulness. Hopefully you have caught some rich glimpses during your practice over these weeks of why this is worthwhile, and why in essence it is essential for you to live your life in a mindful way. For many people, it is like the planting of a seed of mindfulness, or a seed of intention to live our lives in a more meaningful way. It is never easy to know how this seed will

germinate, and when, and how the plant will be nourished and grow. It may feel at times that the seed is lying dormant, but for most people, it is not forgotten, and it is only a matter of waiting for the right time for it to be reawakened.

If you do decide after this ten week experiment that you wish to continue with these practices, it is worth reflecting upon what you will need to maintain your commitment, your enthusiasm and your aspiration and what you need to set in place to support you with this.

If at all possible, we would recommend a continuation of the formal practices of mindfulness, in whatever form suits you the best, alongside the informal practices integrated into your everyday life. These are like two wings of a bird: they support and strengthen one another. In addition, it may be helpful to see if there is a local practice group, meditation class or teacher who can support you with your practice, sustain inspiration and help you to overcome any difficulties if and when they arise. If there is nothing available at a time that suits you, perhaps you could see if there were a few friends or colleagues who would like to meet and practice together, perhaps listening to guided CDs and sharing experience.

# Week 8 – A Mindfulness Based Life

## Home Practice Going Forward

What are the main things I have learned on this course?

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How will I implement what I have learned into my daily life?

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What are my reasons for continuing to practice mindfulness after this course ends?

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Realistically how many minutes per day do I want to commit to my daily formal mindfulness practice?

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Which of the formal practices covered on this course would I like to do on a regular basis? (eg. sitting practice, bodyscan, mindful movement, loving kindness practice)

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Which of the daily life practices covered on this course would I like to do on a regular basis? (eg. breathing space, compassion break, daily life activities) \_\_\_\_\_

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What will I say to myself if I experience a resistance to continuing to practice mindfulness (eg. Nike slogan – just do it) \_\_\_\_\_

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